

Report Documentation Page			<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>	
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1. REPORT DATE 2004	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2004 to 00-00-2004		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Quick Look: Perspective: Airpower in Counterinsurgency Operations			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
			5b. GRANT NUMBER	
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
			5e. TASK NUMBER	
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) CADRE/AR,Director, Airpower Research Institute,401 Chennault Circle,Maxwell AFB,AL,36112-6428			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
14. ABSTRACT				
15. SUBJECT TERMS				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 2
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON	



Perspective: Airpower in Counterinsurgency Operations¹

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Background: Mythology from the US experience in the Vietnam War holds that airpower—and the US military in general—does not perform well against insurgencies. History shows, however, that when airmen apply airpower in the right way and in the right context, it can contribute significantly to achieving counterinsurgency campaign objectives. Moreover, armed with an understanding of how US airpower has performed effectively in these types of wars in the past, contemporary airpower planners can become more effective in current operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere.

Discussion: US leaders called upon airpower to assist ground forces in a type of counterinsurgency campaign at the dawn of aviation history. Anticipating the importance of Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), Secretary of War Newton Baker dispatched the First Aero Squadron to assist General John J. Pershing as he pursued the Mexican bandit Pancho Villa. The fragile Curtiss JN-1s that the squadron used were ill suited to the rugged demands of the mission and they contributed little to achieving the campaign's objectives. Pershing's limited view of the airplane's potential relegated it to reconnaissance and communications duties. The airmen, including Benjamin Foulois, Carl Spaatz, and William C. Sherman—all destined to wield significant influence over US airpower development—gained valuable insight into the complexities of employing airpower in harsh conditions. Far from being deterred by the bleak results achieved during the Mexican Punitive Expedition, these airmen emerged from the experience with a belief in the potential rather than in the limits of airpower.

US involvement in counterinsurgencies continued through the 1920s and 1930s with US Marine Corps aviators providing effective service against rebels in Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. USMC airmen developed tactics and procedures for providing accurate close air support to ground forces in contact with the enemy. These experiences helped sustain the Corps during the lean interwar years and provided valuable experience for the Marine Air-Ground team to build upon when war came in the 1940s.

After World War II, counterinsurgency warfare assumed greater importance because of the tensions between the two superpowers. Countries like Greece, the Philippines, and Vietnam became surrogate battlegrounds where Communist and Democratic ideologies came into conflict below the nuclear threshold. In the Greek Civil War (1943-1949), US support for the Greek National Army (GNA) included training, planning, and tactical assistance. A key feature in the ultimate success of this counterinsurgency effort was in the emergence of effective indigenous leaders among the GNA. The insurgents took advantage of remote mountainous terrain to stage their operations thus forcing the GNA to conduct complex combined arms operations. US advisors divided air operations into three categories: direct support of troops, isolation of the battlefield, and independent air operations. Ultimately, the combination of well-planned air operations, relentless pressure from ground forces, and shifting political events that denied supplies and sanctuary to the insurgents allowed the GNA to prevail over its Communist opponents. In this campaign, the US contributed advice and support to Royal Hellenic Air Force personnel who ultimately performed impressively in a successful counterinsurgency.

American advisors also assisted counterinsurgency efforts in the 1946-1956 Hukbalahap Insurgency in the Philippines. The main effort of the counterinsurgency focused on denying or removing sources of popular support from the insurgents. This required detailed analyses of the Philippine culture, society, and economy. When Philippine forces attempted to use “search and destroy” techniques—even when backed by significant airpower capabilities—the insurgents retreated to the jungle to fight another day. The path to success involved small-scale saturation patrols that kept guerrilla forces off balance. Small L-5 aircraft provided reconnaissance, air presence, and command and control capabilities for ground forces as they pushed into Hukbalahap-dominated areas. Later, World War II surplus P-51 Mustangs provided close air support service. C-47 aircraft supplied long-range patrols. Government forces gradually strangled the Huk rebels through the

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judicious use of lethal combat power coupled with relentless psychological pressure. This type of counterinsurgency campaign succeeded because the military campaign afforded the government time to achieve legitimacy and stability by addressing the populace's concerns while simultaneously pressuring the rebels.

The US effort to defeat Viet Cong insurgents in Vietnam was complex and must be viewed through the lens of airpower development in the 1960s when the USAF began to favor jet aircraft over propeller-driven types. Moreover, US air doctrine that emphasized using airpower against industrial centers of gravity proved to be a poor fit for the Vietnam counterinsurgency. Because of the internal and external pressures that influenced each stage of the war, America's Vietnam experience is far too complex to summarize in simple "lessons learned" for counterinsurgency warfare. It is clear, however, that airpower provided commanders with critical leverage during the war in the south and that, frequently, airpower provided capabilities required to defeat Viet Cong forces. Much of this success was a result of the introduction of specialized aircraft, uniquely designed originals or highly modified existing types, that allowed a tailored use of the available airpower. Aircraft like the O-1, O-2, OV-10, A-1, A-26, T-28, AC-47, AC-119, AC-130, EC-47, B-26, and drones like the QU-22 and the Lightning Bug (launched and controlled from a DC-130) enabled airpower to focus on a determined and elusive enemy.

Observations:

1. Air forces can contribute significantly to counterinsurgency campaigns.
2. Host government stability and legitimacy is the single factor that determines success in this type of war. Airpower should contribute significantly to this aspect of the campaign by providing constructive effects through information operations, airlift, aeromedical evacuation, and other forms of humanitarian assistance.
3. The level of effort shouldered by indigenous government forces—especially air forces—provides a conspicuous indicator of how well the counterinsurgency is progressing. If the host government cannot operate its own air force, it probably cannot blunt the psychological assault launched by the insurgents.
4. Airpower provides ISR capabilities that can help locate, identify, and track insurgent forces—services that reside in no other service component.
5. As long as the insurgents do not make the mistake of massing forces to confront friendly ground forces, lethal air attacks will probably bolster the insurgents' cause.
6. Air and space platforms must be tailored to match the unconventional and small scale of the counterinsurgency effort. This does not mean the platforms must be "low-tech," only that they must be specifically designed to perform the types of missions required in a counterinsurgency rather than adapting "large war" capabilities to the small war environment.

¹ The best source for the history of airpower in counterinsurgency operations is James S. Corum and Wray R. Johnson. *Airpower in Small Wars: Fighting Insurgents and Terrorists* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003). This is the source for all of the examples used in this *CADRE Quick Look*.